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## Geographical knowledges, universities, and academic freedom

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## Geographical knowledges, universities, and academic freedom

### Abstract

I want to offer some perspectives on the university as an institution, on the conditions of knowledge production that should prevail in that institution, and on how those conditions affect the kinds of geographical knowledges circulating within and beyond universities. In recent years, there has been a lot of published debate in geography books, journals, e-lists, and newsletters about making the professional knowledges we collectively produce more 'relevant'.

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## Geographical knowledges, universities and academic freedom

I want to offer some perspectives on the university as an institution, on the conditions of knowledge production that should prevail in that institution, and on how those conditions affect the kinds of geographical knowledges circulating within and beyond universities. In recent years, there has been a lot of published debate in geography books, journals, e-lists and newsletters about making the professional knowledges we collectively produce more ‘relevant’. While that (perennial) debate is worth having, my focus here is rather different. Instead of discussing what we do (or *should* do) with the geographical knowledges we produce through research and teaching, I want to look at the institutional conditions that underpin the production of professional geographic knowledge in the first place. My main question is this: what sorts of institutional conditions produce what kinds of geographical knowledges? More specifically: what understanding of universities is most conducive to maximising the plurality of geographical knowledges and avoiding the tendential hegemony of one or more modes of knowledge now and in the future? I ask this latter question because it seems to me that democratic societies need, constitutively, to foster diversity in the realm of claims-making: this is one guarantor of their health. Without sounding pompous, universities remain (and should remain) a key site where a multiplicity of cognitive, moral and aesthetic perspectives on the world flourish. As such, they are essential institutions of democracies are to remain just that: societies where different viewpoints can not only be heard but accorded respect, even as they may be subject to searching criticism.

These introductory comments having been made, my arguments proceed telegraphically as a series of points. I write, as some readers already know, with a personal and professional stake in the continued existence and vibrancy of a broad and plural ‘critical human geography’. The first thing to say is obvious: geographical knowledges matter in the double sense that they are cover issues that are technically, cognitively, morally and aesthetically important *and* they have palpable effects. As Derek Gregory (2004) rightly observes in *The Colonial Present*, the schoolyard rhyme about the power of words ‘Sticks and stones will break my bones ...’ has never been accurate: as he says, “it affords neither protection nor solace” (p. xiv). Like Gregory I take it as axiomatic that geographical knowledges actively shape the thoughts, actions and self-understanding of

those who purvey and consume these knowledges, wittingly or not. They are productive as well as produced.

The second thing to say is equally obvious: that universities are merely *one* site where geographical knowledges are produced and from which they circulate into the wider society. Universities and their disciplinary constituents may once have held a near-monopoly on the production of formalised, non-colloquial knowledge. These days, however, they exist in societies (at least here in the West) where the volume and diversity of knowledge has expanded in proportion to the number of institutions and actors in the knowledge-producing business – for instance, the media, think tanks, research institutes, NGOs, charities and religious bodies like the Scientologists. As David Harvey memorably insisted in 1974, we should ask of these knowledges not whether they are ‘true’ or false’ but, rather, “what it is that produces them and what they serve to produce” (p. 162). These knowledges are part of what Henry Giroux (2000) terms a ‘public pedagogy’ in which people receive quotidian instruction about the world beyond their doorstep. They are politics by other means.

Thirdly, in recent years not just but especially left-wing academics have bemoaned what’s been call ‘the new higher education’ or simply ‘New U’. This is certainly true in human geography where people like Neil Smith (2000) now describe Western public universities as ‘sausage factories’. Despite the considerable intra and international differences in Western HE systems, the big narrative goes something like this: universities are behaving in more business-like ways, national states are hard-wiring universities more directly into wealth production, students are increasingly interpellated as consumers and investors in their own human capital, and academic staff are less free than heretofore as they grumpily enact what philosopher Gillian Howie (2005: 6) sardonically calls “company policy”.

I think this narrative can be overstated. We should, as educational sociologist Rob Cuthbert suggests, “avoid ... hackneyed and ungrounded *cries de coeur* ...” (2000: 243). For instance, Paul Trowler’s (1998) book *Academics responding to change* – which is about UK higher education – identifies an ‘implementation gap’ that has frustrated the attempts of ministers, civil servants and university managers to corporatise British universities. This is not, of course, to say that nothing has changed; clearly, much *has* altered in British

universities, as it has in virtually all other Western tertiary sectors. But I suspect we're in the *middle* of a 'long revolution': there is still time to use our remaining status and freedom as public professionals to offer a vision of university education that does not accommodate instrumentalism to the exclusion of everything else in the production, teaching and use of geographical knowledge. (Castree, 2002). As I will explain below, I think senior geographers and established academics more generally have a special role to play here.

My fourth point is that I suspect few of us possess a thought-through conception of what universities should actually do or what they stand for, *despite* spending our working lives in these institutions. This is certainly true among left critics in human geography who, to date, are clear about what they're *against* – i.e. corporatised universities – but not so sure what they're *for*, if the published literature is anything to go by (for instance, a special issue of *Antipode* [2000] that I co-edited is long on diagnosis and short on ideas about 'what is to be done?'). We need, I would argue, a *positive thesis* about the university's function that can galvanise and motivate those of us who are nervous about the drift of Western higher education. Certainly, those on the left of human geography and other social sciences have been often vociferous critics of the 'new U'. But what notion of the university do we seek to uphold?

Here I think we shouldn't be afraid to be a bit old fashioned. The educational sociologist Andrew Wernick recently argued that "[Left] ... thinking about the contemporary university seems inhibited by progressivist prejudices that leave it, in the end, both unwilling to affirm the intellectual vocation as such and uncomfortable before anything that might smack of nostalgia ... for what is being obliterated" (Wernick, 2003: 143). If he's right – and I think he is – we could do worse than resurrect a rather venerable idea of the university's role: as, to quote sociologist Steve Fuller (2000: 113), "that ... institution resolutely devoted to the pursuit of inquiry *as such* ...".

This idea has, of course, acted as unseen compass in most Western universities for decades; for decades too it has arguably been honoured in the breach, especially in so-called Big Science where the state or business has used the visible hand of earmarked funding to favour certain modes of inquiry. In metaphorical terms, this idea posits the university as a republic of knowledge where justified technical, cognitive, moral and

aesthetic claims about the world are, in principle, *tolerated regardless of their content*. In such an institution knowledge is not beholden to special interests but is genuinely public. And this is guaranteed by a formal separation between the provenance and the uses of knowledge. The value of this separation is that knowledge made and shared through research, publishing and teaching can serve *many* interests simultaneously without being subservient *to any one of them*. So, in essence, this notion of the university upholds its admittedly patchy *democratic* heritage: as a site of free expression so long as certain standards of logic and evidence are observed in the conduct of claims-making.

This brings me, fifthly, back to geographical knowledges, specifically those produced by professional geographers. There's a lot of geographical knowledge *outside* academe that has nefarious uses, as Derek Gregory's book shows very powerfully; but equally, geographical knowledges produced *within* the academy can be made to serve special interests (for instance, think of geography's historical complicity with colonialism and the present-day military uses of GIS). Equally, though, some geographical knowledges can offer fresh and often highly critical perspectives on what passes for common sense in the wider world. For instance, though feminism and anti-racism hardly originated in universities, since the 60s these institutions have nurtured and propelled forward both bodies of thought and practice despite a backlash against them in certain sections of Western society. It follows that in the medium-to-long term, we need to avoid a situation where the grounds of academic freedom are undermined: that is, a situation where certain actual or potential lines of intellectual inquiry cannot be pursued because of the real or imagined 'needs' of constituencies outside the university.

In my view human geography, like the social sciences and humanities more generally, can act as a bulwark against the normalising tendencies that many of us see in 'the new HE'. Critical human geography, for instance, has flourished in British universities despite the RAE and all the rest, *and* has helped create a discipline of enormous internal diversity and vitality in terms of its constituent knowledge-claims and communities. Over the next thirty years, those communities will have a professional stake in *maintaining* that diversity rather than reducing it to suit the perceived demands of students, government, firms or 'user-groups'

My penultimate point is that all this relates to that fabulously rich and polysemic term whose meaning is always worth struggling over: namely, *value*. I'd be prepared to say that academic freedom is an *absolute* good – a value in itself. Why? Because it prevents one or other kind of knowledge being seen as especially valuable over and above any other kinds. In other words, academic freedom is the value that allows other values to find a home. As the philosopher Gordon Graham (2002) argues in his little book *Universities*, if all academic knowledge is made to serve one or other social need – like graduate employability – then we lose one important source of ideas for engendering economic, cultural and moral *change* in society.

My final comment relates to practical actions to uphold academic freedom within and beyond the discipline of geography. Ultimately, the national state remains the best guarantor of academic freedom to the extent that it upholds the idea that universities have the right to be self-governing. This idea is, of course, under attack here in Britain, albeit in the cunning guise of us all disciplining *ourselves* to conform to the contentless culture of RAE, national teaching assessment etc. In departments like my own we are all, in some senses, acting *in loco politicus* for external initiatives designed to make British universities more responsive to economic needs. Two ways to reverse this trend strike me as quite important. First, and most obviously, I think senior figures in geography and other disciplines have a special responsibility to articulate a vision of what universities' function should properly be. I'm not suggesting that they originate such a vision: that is and should be a collective endeavour. But I am suggesting that these figures have a privileged role in upholding (or not) an idea of what universities are for that can serve the interests of the diverse constituency of researchers and teachers that comprise geography and myriad other disciplines. The difficulty, of course, is that professional success often means that one accepts the blandishments of the prevailing regime. It takes courage to draw a line in the sand if you and those whose interests you notionally represent think it necessary to do so. Secondly, and less obviously, I think the rest of us need to recognise how important it is to undertake the endless, mundane work of speaking against the drip-drip of outside initiatives that erode academic freedom. Such speaking against can take the form of objections raised in faculty meetings, criticisms made in formal invited responses to HEFCE position papers, and so on. As Christopher Hitchens (2001: 3) notes, "most people, most of the time, prefer to seek approval or security", and he reminds us that "doing nothing is also a decision" (*ibid.* 83). I think that if we wish to

uphold the freedom to research and teach more-or-less as we please, we need to take time out from researching and teaching and attend to the micropolitics of procedure and policy as it impacts our daily lives. It's one thing to write about this micropolitics – I've done so myself in several geography journals. It's quite another to act and to get others in one's department to act with you.

Noel Castree

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